

The Role of Technology in the Art of Nam June Paik - Paik's Video Sculpture
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Paik's interest in television as an object ensues from his desire to humanize technology by applying it to aesthetic purposes. Paik believed that before the late sixties and early seventies, technology had been used almost exclusively for commercial and military purposes. He wished to rescue technology from this role and apply it to more humanistic aims. Humanizing television, he decided, meant using it as an artistic and educational medium. Thus by promoting television as an artistic medium, he hopes to educate the public about its value as an ordinary object with great potential for communication; a medium for aesthetic and philosophical expression. In this respect, Paik's entire video career has been devoted to this aim of humanizing technology.

Demonstrating the operational principles of television and making the medium understandable to the lay person was one means Paik employed to humanize technology. He also endeavored to humanize television and technology by treating the television set as a physical object appropriated from the "household", and as a communications device to be appreciated on a higher, aesthetic level. By treating the television set as a concrete object, and using it to convey conceptions about the medium itself, Paik at once changed the perception of the medium and broadened our ideas concerning its applications and possibilities. Paik summarized his aim stating that, "the real issue implied in art and technology is not to make another scientific toy, but how to humanize technology and the electronic medium." (2) He wrote in *Expanded Education* that, "Since my color TV is the unusual application of an every day commodity, this (application) stimulates... more original, less prejudiced thinking [about it]."(3)

To encourage public appreciation of television as an art form, (medium and object) Paik decided to first familiarize the viewer with the operations of the television set. With this purpose in mind, he set out to demonstrate the different electronic principles involved in producing the television image. Paik began by physically altering both the exterior of the set and the interior electro-mechanical modules within the television. He modified and changed the circuitry and other mechanisms, by removing or rewiring the existing devices, or by adding new inputs which distorted the broadcast imagery in order to create a new visual experience. In one of the earliest critical reviews of the new medium of video art, "TV the Next Medium," 1969, John Margolies aptly described Paik as a "pioneer in the area of disabling the normal function of the television receiver, turning it into a 'canvas' for creating abstract patterns and distortions of the transmitted image." (4) This comparison of the television to a canvas is particularly appropriate for it was exactly what Paik had in mind. At the premiere of his first videotape in 1965, he announced "the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas," adding "someday artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semi-conductors as they work today with brushes, violins & junk." (5) With this proclamation, Paik placed video firmly within the avant-garde tradition.

According to the video critic David Ross, Paik's introduction of distorted (television) imagery was a means of expanding the shock value of his performances and subverting the audience's preconceived notions concerning the organization of an image.(6) The results of his experiments were often startling and beautiful images. Some images relied entirely on the inherent properties of the television itself, creating images from the rasters and scan lines, while others relied upon the distortion of the broadcast signal itself. Later he made videotape loops of images distorted in this manner, the most renowned of which is the face of Richard Nixon (1967) twisted and contorted to the point of black humor. (7)

The picture on a television screen is produced when charged electrons strike the interior, phosphor-coated surface of the cathode-ray tube (picture-tube) in an organized manner. One of the most outstanding features of

the television (or video) image is that light radiates from the screen at the viewer creating a luminosity not found in any other medium. By altering and disrupting the picture tube's regular scanning pattern (raster), Paik was able to alter the arrangement of the electrons on the screen. In his first electronic art exhibition in 1963, Paik exhibited the many techniques he had developed for distorting broadcast imagery. Each of these techniques involved changing, in some fashion, the set's inner circuitry. He proudly points out that none of these sets used the simple roll or breakup easily achieved by manipulating the vertical and horizontal controls of the set. All of these early experiments were both an aesthetic exploration as well as an educational exercise.

Paik's first television sculptures involved the alteration of the picture-tube and the actual disabling of the normal functions of the television. Paik observed that the resulting televisions were like Tinguely's machines - nonfunctional. (8) While the televisions no longer functioned in their normal capacity, they did function as an artistic medium. One of the prepared television sets at the Galerie Parnass had no vertical modulation, the raster collapsed creating a single horizontal line. The set was later turned on its side transforming the image into a vertical line. (9) Entitled Zen for TV, this piece "demystifies" the television by collapsing the television image and all its potential information into a single line. The concept of Zen is extremely important in all Paik's work for he employs Zen methods and ideas to convey meaning and instruct the viewer. As the name suggests, the piece was titled Zen because of the Zen method of transforming something very complex into something very simple. An even more important Zen aspect of this early piece is the required contemplation of the image in order to produce a new state of awareness-- of the expressive potential of television.

In his early installations produced throughout the late sixties and early seventies, each method Paik employed to alter the television image demonstrated some aspect of how the television functioned. At Wuppertal there was a negative set in which the black and whites were reversed and one which was "out of sync," causing the image to move across the screen in continuous motion. Because the television sets were displayed in such a way that one could see all of the technical set-ups, the viewer was able to directly observe how Paik had replaced or added to the circuitry and the signal using audio-inputs (wave forms and sync pulses from various generators including tape recorders and radios) or otherwise rearranged the electronics of the set. More importantly, the audience could participate directly in the creation of the video image by manipulating the set, by talking into the microphone, adjusting the signal generators, and by various other means.

2. Gene Youngblood Expanded Cinema (NY: EP Dutton), 1970. 308.
3. Nam June Paik, "Expanded Education for the Paperless Society". Radical Software 1 (1970). 8.
4. John Margolies, "TV – The Next Medium". Art in America Sept/Oct. 1969: 54.
5. Nam June Paik, "Electronic Video Recorder", Judson Rosebush (ed.) Videa 'n' Videology, 1973. n. pag.
6. David Ross, "Process and Ritual", Artscanada, Oct. 1973: 41.
7. Hermine Freed, "Nam June Paik Retrospective", Art Journal, Fall 1982, p. 249.
8. Johnathan Price Video Visions: A Medium Distovers Itself. NY: New American Library, 1972. 128.
9. Zen for TV, 1963, had another kind of preparation but when the set was moved from Caolgne to Wuppertal it broke down and became only one line (a horizontal line) which Paik then turned on its side. Bruce Kurtz, "Paikvision", Artforum Oct. 1982: 54.